



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

November 16, 2004

News Release

LAW FIRM, IRANIAN MEDIA PERSONALITY LINKED TO FAR-REACHING VISA FRAUD SCHEME

LOS ANGELES – An Iranian media personality and a Van Nuys attorney are among four persons who were arrested over the weekend on federal charges in connection with a multi-agency investigation led by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) into a fraud scheme involving the filing of bogus employment visa applications on behalf of hundreds of foreign nationals seeking to come to the United States.

Those arrested Saturday pursuant to federal arrest warrants are:

- Henry Hossein Haghighi Heguman, West Hills, 59, a businessman who appears regularly on Iranian TV and radio, who is described in a criminal complaint as the leader of the scheme;
- Bitu Logham Hoffman, Carlsbad, 39, a partner in the law firm Hoffman, Rahmaty & Associates;
- Farideh Mir, Sherman Oaks, 58, an employee of Hoffman's firm; and
- Grace Houra Shahraz Edison, 49, a Canoga Park businesswoman.

On Friday, federal agents executed search warrants at five locations, including Hoffman's law offices on Sepulveda Boulevard in Van Nuys, Haghighi's residence in West Hills, and the Encino offices of United Financial International Corporation and California Gold Mortgage, two businesses whose names appeared on some of the fraudulent employment-based visa petitions.

The investigation began in April 2002 after special agents with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) received several leads from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) adjudications officers at the California Service Center, where the employment-based visa petitions are processed. As agents looked into the case, they discovered that Haghighi and his associates were charging their primarily Iranian clients from \$8,000 to \$30,000 to obtain fraudulent employment-based visas.

“This kind of fraud undermines the integrity of our nation’s legal immigration system and generates millions of dollars of illicit income for those involved,” said Loraine Brown, special agent-in-charge for ICE investigations in Los Angeles. “ICE is determined to target not only the criminal organizations behind these schemes, but anyone else who profits from them.”

Employment-based visas are normally issued when a business in the United States needs a person to fill a specific job and is unable to find a qualified employee in the U.S. labor pool. The business can file a petition to allow a particular alien, who is supposed to be qualified to fill the job, to enter the United States to work for the petitioning business.

The affidavit in support of the criminal complaint, which was unsealed late yesterday when the defendants made their first court appearance, describes how one man hired Haghghi in 1999 to help him come to the United States. Haghghi suggested the man seek to immigrate as a pizza cook. The man acknowledged he had no experience working in restaurants or in the food industry. Despite that, Haghghi persuaded a pizza parlor in Glendale to file an employment-based visa application on the man’s behalf.

In most cases, the aliens who immigrated to the United States as part of this scheme never went to work for the petitioning businesses. During the investigation, ICE agents examined more than 550 employment-based visa applications filed by Haghghi and his associates from May 1993 to early 2003, and compared them against the tax withholding records maintained by the California Employment Development Department. The comparison showed the petitioning businesses reported wages for only 13 percent of the aliens who came to the United States on the employment-based visas. Moreover, ICE agents say the probe revealed Haghghi and Edison frequently instructed aliens to pay their own payroll taxes for three to six months to make it appear they were on the petitioning company’s roles.

Court documents show that Haghghi and his associates relied upon more than 200 Southern California businesses, ranging from medical clinics to auto parts stores, to serve as petitioners for their clients.

Haghghi, Edison, and Mir made their initial appearances in United States District Court in Los Angeles yesterday and are due in court today and Thursday to complete the proceedings. Hoffman appeared before a judge in San Diego and has been ordered held on \$500,000 bond.

The four are each charged with Conspiracy to Commit Visa Fraud. If convicted of the charges, each faces a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.

A criminal complaint contains allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

ICE agents say this case represents one of the largest employment related visa fraud schemes ever uncovered in Southern California.

ICE received substantial support in the investigation from the USCIS California Service Center, Department of Labor, Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of State, and Ventura County Sheriff's Department.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.